



Van Demon's Land

In *Van Helsing*, director Stephen Sommers stages a monster's ball and you're invited. Dracula, Frankenstein, the Wolf Man and even a bit of Steinback pathos. Who says it's all about the effects?

Whether it's a giant octopus in *Deep Rising* or Imhotep and his army of the dead in *The Mummy*, director Stephen Sommers is a conjurer of the fantastic. His latest act brings together a who's who of horror, centring on the adventures of archetypal vampire slayer Van Helsing, created by Bram Stoker himself.

How did you manage to get all these horror characters into one movie?

That was the key. When I first came up with the idea of putting them all in the same movie, I watched all the old originals and I thought, "Well, I know that they could fit into the same world, at the same time", but I didn't want to make a movie about a guy and he kills the three monsters.


Any idiot could make that movie, it's so obvious. So I just watched all the movies and I remember one day, I was looking at a picture of the brides and I thought, "I wonder what a guy would do with three gorgeous women for 400 years? Well, they'd probably be doing stuff and they'd have offspring", and then I thought I was going down a bad path. I thought, "No, that's not going to work because vampires are the undead, their offspring would probably be born dead". And I thought, "Oh, okay, they're born dead. The brides would want their children to come to life... oh, they would get Victor Frankenstein, because he is this mad scientist genius. He's into reanimation. And what if they got this guy, and he created Frankenstein..." and so on.

As soon as I got that epiphany, as soon as I realised why Dracula would be the only person on earth who would absolutely need Frankenstein, it all just came together. As soon as I had that figured out, then it was like, "oh, I can make this movie".

Because for me it was really a challenge. I wanted to make sure all of the characters and their stories could interweave and it wasn't just your typical action non-stop thrill ride, or whatever.

Did you think about other creatures as well and if so, why didn't you include them?

All my friends always tease me. I was talking about doing a movie about two people chatting on a beach. And someone once said, "Yeah, right, and then the spaceships arrive". Like I can't help myself. I love these kinds of movies, not because of monsters. I told the actors, "there are no monsters in this movie, just people with really bad problems". But what I love about these movies is their imagery, because they're so visual, and I thought, "ooh, I really want to do that kind of thing". But when I sat down, no, it was always Dracula,



told the actors, there are no monsters in this movie, just people with really bad problems"

Frankenstein, and the Wolf Man. And then I thought, well, to introduce Van Helsing I thought "oh I can get Mr. Hyde in there", because he's a very interesting character. I like the whole Notre Dame aspect. So to be honest, there was at one point a moat around Dracula's castle and the Creature from the Black Lagoon was in there. That was in the first draft and I realised I was pushing it. So I stuck to the originals.

You have a huge responsibility because *The Mummy* and *The Mummy Returns* were such international blockbusters. What do you expect from this film?

The two things that really knocked my socks off are when Hugh and Kate kissed; the reaction in the audience is just amazing, you can't buy that kind of excitement. I realised they really love these characters. At

the end of the day that's what it's all about. You can do all the special effects and all the action you want but if they don't love the characters and they're not interested in the story it can never be a blockbuster, it can never be a big hit.

And another thing that really excites me is not all the screams and laughs but the dead silence. They get so sucked into the story and what's going to happen next and the twists, and we don't want to talk about the third act, what happens to Hugh and Kate, but especially the last half hour, when you're sitting there and no one's moving, you could hear a pin drop. No one's rustling, no one's going to the bathroom, you're onto something. I felt really good.

You said that Hugh Jackman is the only guy you wanted for this role. Why?

He had to be a man, not a boy. The character required a lot. He needed to be a big guy, very physical, charismatic. And there really aren't that many actors that fit that bill. And Hugh, he just seemed perfect from day one for the role because he had all those characteristics.

Do you have a sequel boiling in your mind?

Sometimes cynical people might think the corporation came to me with these monsters and that wasn't



HAIR RAISING STUFF

Working for ILM, Aussie FX supervisor Ben Snow has worked on some of the biggest effects films to date. But *Van Helsing* presented its own set of challenges. Snow spills his guts to R4's Simon Wells.

In his homeland for a well earned break and a brief *Van Helsing* promo visit, ILM FX wizard Ben Snow recalls his early days at the San Francisco special effects facility with just a hint of nostalgia.

"*Jurassic Park* was a tremendous achievement" he reflects, "but they took a lot of time and put a lot of effort into it. These days you just can't spend that kind of time on the effects. He should know. Since *Jurassic Park*, Snow's worked steadily on a series of blockbusters including *The Mummy*, *Pearl Harbor* and *Star Wars Episode II*. Currently employed as a senior effects supervisor at the world's most famous FX house, Snow recalls the initial shock at the sheer volume of effects *Van Helsing* required. "We were like, boy, this is massive!" he exclaims.

As a result of the film's ambitious schedule, the company decided to split effects duties between two supervisors – Scott Squires and himself, something Snow believes is likely to become increasingly common as blockbusters become more effects heavy. Despite their best efforts to optimise the workload, the effects-laden *Van Helsing* wound up using three

quarters of the disc space at ILM. "That's a LOT of space. Somebody calculated it as equivalent to almost 2.6 billion MP3 songs" laughs Snow.

With its generous supply of hairy beasts, *Van Helsing* presented the FX wizards with a unique set of challenges. Numero uno was something that's plagued CG animators since the late twentieth century – the problem of creating convincing CG hair.

"We had grungy werewolves with matted hair, wet hair. We had three beautiful vampire brides that transform into bat creatures with long flowing locks in different styles. We had to create a whole new set of tools just to be able to control their hair. It took a massive amount of resources so it looks right on screen. We developed some really good tools to make it easier but it was still very difficult. With something like Mr Hyde we adopted some of the skin technology we'd developed for Dobby in *Harry Potter* and the *Chamber of Secrets*" reveals Snow. "But Hyde's a big guy. He's gotta move. He's got muscles we want to see move. He's large, oversize. We wanna see his flesh jiggle when he runs around. Stephen also wanted him to smoke a cigar so we had to deal

with that. He's got pants. He's got scars all over him. And he's got hair."

However, it wasn't just perfecting skin or follicles that made *Van Helsing* such a huge undertaking. It was simply the staggering volume of shots required. "It was crazy!" Snow recalls. "We had three different werewolves, three bat brides, digital doubles for a lot of the main characters. We had Mr Hyde, these pygmy bats flying around. All these different creatures. It made it very hard to get a run up because you just start to get good at one creature and then you're on to another. Another problem was the wolf transformations, where people are literally ripping out of their skin. Towards the end everyone starts getting cold feet and begin wondering if they're gonna get the rating they need. Suddenly it was 'uh oh, is this gonna be too much? Is it gonna be too gory? Will we lose our rating?' Then we thought... 'no. These are supernatural creatures. They're not human'. Look at what was happening in *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *Lord of the Rings*. What they've got away with. It's not like shooting someone. It's much more fantastical."



the case at all. I did it all on my own. And same with sequels. When I was making *The Mummy* I didn't know if people wanted to see a mummy movie. I guarantee you I wasn't thinking about sequels until the day after it opened.

Why did you change Van Helsing's first name?

Right off I wanted him to be a different Van Helsing. The reason I came up with Van Helsing is watching the original Bela Lugosi's *Dracula* – I just love the fact that they vanished, you know, but they didn't come into the 20th century, they're all from the late 19th century, *Dracula*, the Werewolf, *Frankenstein*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the *Invisible Man* – all these people I thought, "why did they vanish at the end of the 19th century", and I thought "well, what if there was a group, an ancient secret society, like the Knights Templar, an ancient secret society made up of all the religions in the world, really truly good men who got together and then they would need a kind of left hand, like Van Helsing, and they would train him". So the reason I changed his name is because I couldn't name my lead guy Abraham, it's just not a cool name, I'm sorry. So that's why I changed his name to Gabriel. And then once I got into the character more I realised, "okay, what this movie is really about is the right hand of the Devil kicking on the left hand of God. And it had to be Gabriel, the only thing he could have been named, is Gabriel".

What movie monsters scared you when you were a kid?

To me they're all so different, even the *Mummy*. With the *Wolf Man*, I just find him so terrifying because he's like a giant dog, and there's

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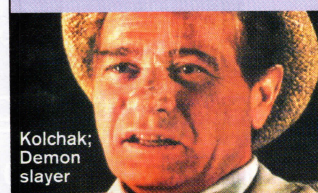
Career Vampire Hunters

It's not 9 to 5 hours, that's for sure.

Peter Cushing: He's played his fair share of mad scientists, however Peter Cushing is equally known for playing Van Helsing or his descendant (as pictured above in *Van Helsing Versus Dracula*, protecting Stephanie Beacham from Christopher Lee).

Blade: He may be part bloodsucker himself, but Wesley Snipes is the only one standing in the way of the Vampire Council and their plans for world domination.

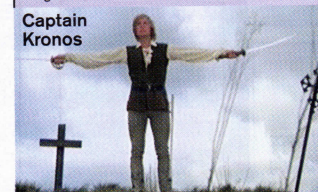
Kolchak: Short lived seventies TV series *The Night Stalker*. By day reporter for the Independent News Service, by night his probings into the Las Vegas netherworld



Kolchak; Demon slayer

reveals all kinds of supernatural shenanigans. In the 90 min pilot, Kolchak sniffs a vampire when a hospital is robbed of its blood plasma supply.

Captain Kronos, Vampire Hunter Decker out in funky tights, this stoic, sword-wielding crusader (the hilariously stone-faced Horst Janson) roams the 17th century English countryside, swiftly putting paid to all things evil. In Brian Clemens' first (and sadly



last installment) it's a youth-sucking demon that incurs the wrath of Kronos.

Buffy: Sexy blonde babe with long legs, nice to the eye and often quick to fly, patrols the streets of her college town for demons and vampires, occasionally having sex with them, but in the most part dropping the bang from gang as she dispatches each new threat with the help of her loyal group of sexually confused, wisecracking nerds.

nothing more frightening than a giant rabid dog chasing you because it's so real. So he's terrifying, but at the same time he's sympathetic because he can be your brother, your neighbour, he can be noble, but at night when his demons come out, when the moon comes out, he's terrifying. And *Frankenstein*, I always look at *Frankenstein* as sort of like the *Elephant Man* – he's scary at first but there's something more to him. He's like Lenny in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, where you almost feel as sorry for him as you do for his victims. It's really this tragic

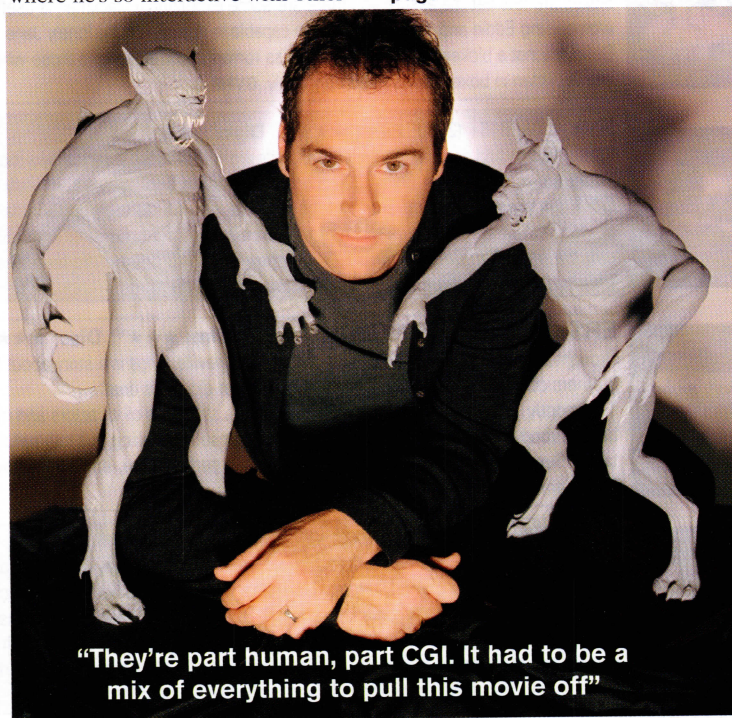
figure. I like them for different reasons. And *Dracula's* really sexy and cool. So they're three very different characters with three very different problems. They all scared me but I think that's why all three of these characters have been around for so long, is because they're such damn interesting characters, there's so much behind them.

Why did you use full CGI with the Werewolf and the Dracula beast instead of combining live action and CGI like with the brides?

Because they couldn't have been done any other way. They couldn't have been done a year ago but now if you see them and the feedback that I'm getting... Take the Werewolf, he's so lifelike, he's so three dimensional – the hair, the way he moves, the way we shot it where he's so interactive with other

creatures, with the set, it's like that *Wolf Man* couldn't have been done a year, two years ago, and I thought, "oh, I didn't want it to be a man in a suit". As much as sometimes people complain about CGI, if it's done brilliantly... and that's what we had to do because I had to really pull it off. I mean, a man in a suit can just take you out of the movie as quickly as bad CGI, so you had to buy it, you had to believe it. Also, with the *Dracula* beast, to have him flying around you have to do it with CGI. And with the brides, I just thought "we've got to try it, it's never been done before". Usually when you see people flying, we all know, even if someone doesn't understand blue screen, we all know it's somebody on wires in front of a blue screen. I said, "Not this movie! This movie we have to figure out a way to really fly people down through a village and loop the loop", so it was a matter of inventing the camera equipment. Because to get the cameras to do the things I wanted the cameras to do, to get the plates and to get real humans to fly through, that it couldn't be blue screen, it couldn't be wires. It had to be an integration of everything. We had to build massive sets and enhance them with mattes and models and miniatures and the same with all the CGI characters; they're part human, part CGI, it had to be a mix of everything to pull this movie off. It's ILM and many others and they really did it.

Van Helsing is available now and reviewed on the following page



"They're part human, part CGI. It had to be a mix of everything to pull this movie off"



FROM THE VAULT

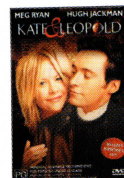
The Hugh Jackman filmography currently available on DVD

As to which actor is associated with the most special features on DVD, that's still open for debate. But Aussie Hugh Jackman would come close to winning this strange award (not too sure whether any awards are actually given for this). The boy from Oz – who can be credited with actually wetting his pants on stage and is on the brink of becoming the next James Bond – boasts a series of DVD titles that have more than your average selection of features. Whether it's the blockbuster *X-Men* franchise; the computer crime caper *Swordfish*; or even the unlikely *Kate & Leopold*; with the special feature extravaganza of *Van Helsing* imminent, DVD extras and Hugh Jackman might just go hand in hand.



X-MEN 2 M15+ (2003) Film: ★★★★★ Disc: ★★★★★

With a worldwide box office to match the superhero status, there was never any doubt that an *X-Men* sequel would follow. Most of the mutants return and still face the 'where do we fit into society?' problem, and the premise of nasty mutants causing havoc is even more prevalent. With a new villain on the scene in the form of William Stryker (Brian Cox) and an unusual alliance on the horizon, *X2* offers more of the over-the-top antics that distinguished the comic. What *X-Men 3* will bring is anybody's guess? But peace and tranquillity it definitely will not be. **GVNR**



KATE & LEOPOLD M15+ (2001) Film: ★★★ Disc: ★★½

Stretching the romantic boundaries with a bit of time travel thrown in is the essence of one of Hugh's lesser-known outings. Playing the role of the English gentleman, Leopold, Hugh suddenly finds himself in 21st century New York, miles away from his 1870s safe haven. Jackman is credible as the gallant and charming Leopold, and Meg Ryan adds the sauce as the cynical marketing exec. With a plot that has more holes than Swiss cheese, this is perfect girls night in as Jackman steals the show. It's also a lesson for the guys in ultimate good male behaviour. **GVNR**



SWORDFISH MA15+ (2001) Film: ★★½ Disc: ★★★

Jackman's the hunky hacker turned trailer trash who gets to ogle Halle's berries and piss off John Travolta in another technically proficient no-brainer from the Joel Silver action factory. Jackman proves he can deliver under enormous pressure – surviving a punishing audition (with a gun to one head and a whore to the other) where he's required to hack into restricted files in under 60 seconds.

Jackman and Travolta's unforgettable appearance on *Rove Live* to promote the film is included here as a special bonus for the region 4 local release. **SH**



SOMEONE LIKE YOU (2001) M15+ Film: ★★½ Disc: ★★★

If *Kate & Leopold* was a lesson in how to act as a man, then *Someone Like You* is a lesson in how not to act like a man, as the general feeling derived from this is that all blokes are rats (let me assure you there are some exceptions). Jackman is useful as the womanising Eddie and Judd is more than capable in the role of the lonely Jane. Definitely not a blokes' film, fans of pointless romantic comedies and those who wish to see Jackman in boxer shorts need only apply. **GVNR**



X-MEN M15+ (2000) Film: ★★★★★ Disc: ★★★

Pretty hard to find anything at fault here, aside from the disbelief factor, and those that do are surely missing the point. This is, after all, a comic book movie at its very best. Our Hugh has a leading role amongst the mutants, playing the hairy and adamantium-clawed Wolverine, and draws much of the film's central focus. Director Bryan Singer calls the shots here and the special FX are more than pleasing, but die-hard fans may have wished there was a little bit more to this film. **GVNR**



ERSKINEVILLE KINGS M15+ (2000) Film: ★★½ Disc: ★★★

Brought together by the death of their father, *Erskineville Kings* is a story about two brothers coming to terms with more than their dear old pop's death. This moody, leisurely paced film depends upon the strengths of its actors and might not be everybody's cup of tea, but stands as no-nonsense filmmaking and raw natural acting talent. Surely Jackman's finest and most little-seen performance, embellished by a strong ensemble support cast. **GVNR**



PAPERBACK HERO M15+ (1999) Film: ★½ Disc: ★½

It's easy to see why Hugh was cast in this role. He has all the blokey qualities required for this unlikely romantic comedy. Here, Jackman's a road train driver with a secret – he moonlights as a top-selling romance novelist! Hugh perfectly captures the Australian 'I don't give a XXXX' attitude, while co-star Claudia Karvan provides the much needed cover... and of course the love interest. Together they provide a great screen partnership, but one that can't quite eclipse the blatantly unbelievable premise. **GVNR**

VAN HELSING

When it comes to dispatching monsters of all breeds, Van's the Man.

Already responsible for *The Mummy* franchise, director Stephen Sommers appears to have his fingers on the 'Generate Cash' button once more as his latest offering is bound to get the sequel greenlight. This time around Sommers has dropped the bandages, instead resurrecting the Universal monster brigade (Wolfman, Dracula and Frankenstein) and remodelling Bram Stoker's legendary vampire hunter as a tough young bloke in the Vatican's employ who must stop Dracula's undead vampire spawn.

In a striking black and white prologue Sommers pays wonderful homage to the Frankenstein films of the thirties. Unfortunately this is as close as it gets to its inspiration, as the next scene sets up the inevitable CG onslaught with a hyperactive Mr. Hyde bouncing about like he's just defected from the set of *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*.

One might be forgiven for thinking the film was shot in Oz given the quantity of Aussies in the cast. Perhaps after the budget was eaten up by the CGI boys the casting cash was minimal. But that's not to say Jackman and Roxburgh don't do a credible job. The Oklahoma kid, Hugh Jackman, is



Director

Stephen Sommers

Starring

Hugh Jackman
Kate Beckinsale
Richard Roxburgh
David Wenham

Rated M15+

Run Time 130 min

Made 2004

Distributor

Universal
Pictures Video

A: 5.1 | **V:** W/S 16:9 |
R: 1.85:1

...nothing less than awe inspiring...

perfectly cast and obviously relishes these physical action roles, while Roxburgh is more than capable as a campy Count Dracula. But Wenham's role as Van's bumbling sidekick is comic relief at its most embarrassing. Also providing solid support is the buxom Beckinsale (fresh from *Underworld*) as committed monster killer, Anna Valerious.

In true blockbuster fashion, *Van Helsing* delivers a rollercoaster ride of effects and action, and Sommers doesn't let us down in any of these departments. The film's relentless pace, barrage of CG visuals and sprinkling of good humour are easily digestible. The FX themselves are nothing less than awe inspiring, necessitating repeat viewings in order to fully appreciate the scope of Sommers's grand, comic-book vision.

EXTRAS: The many **featurettes** (22 mins) are exhaustive, providing tremendous insight into the work of the real stars of the film – the visual FX artists, the prop people, set designers, etc. The main focus, however, is understandably on the monsters, who all warrant their own featurettes. Also a *Virtual Tour of Frankenstein's Lab*. **THE GUVNOR**
The Film: ★★½ **The Disc:** ★★

